

Handout 4: The double object construction and the dative alternation

Seminar *The syntax-semantics interface: Argument structure*, Andrew McIntyre

Possession and double objects

1. Introduction

- The **to-alternation** (also called the *dative alternation*):
 - a. [S Ann [VP sent [NP Mary] [NP a book]]] [double object construction, DOC]
b. [S Ann [VP sent [NP a book] [PP to Mary]]] [to-construction]
- The *to*-alternation mainly found with the following verb classes (more details in Levin 1993):
 - Possession relation** (possibly only intended) brought about between the objects:
 - a. *give, pass, allow, sell, bring, lend, refund, award, allot; throw/kick (a ball)*
 - b. (future having): *promise, bequeath, offer, guarantee, owe*
 - Communication** verbs:
 - a. *tell (a secret), read/recite (a poem)*
 - b. (communication methods) *I SMSed/faxed/e-mailed them an answer*
 - c. **Exceptions**: DOC is unacceptable or only marginal with verbs of manner of speaking: *?shout/yell/whisper/mumble/stutter her the answer*

- A. How do *say* and *tell* differ with respect to the dative alternation? (Use a fairly detailed dictionary to provide you with examples; ignore uses of *tell* which don't involve the communication of information, e.g. *I can't tell* in the sense 'I don't know').
- B. The verbs *teach* and *show* allow dative alternation but don't fit into either of these groups. They have sometimes been regarded as suppletive causatives of other verbs. Which other verbs? Can you find evidence against this analysis? Can you think of an alternative analysis?

- Latin/Romance verbs resist DOC (with some exceptions; see Pinker 1989 on the negative evidence problem that this raises):
 - a. **Cuthbert donated the museum his stamp collection.*
 - b. **She explained them the subject.*
 - c. **They exhibited them the etchings.*
- Verbs expressing taking something from someone disallow DOCs (unlike French, German)
 - a. *She deprived/robbed John of the books* / **She deprived/robbed John the books*
 - b. *She took/stole the books from John* / **She took/stole John the books*
- The *to*-alternation is not the same thing as the **for-alternation** (=benefactive alternation). Here there is no variant with *to*. See appendix for more details.
 - a. [S Ann [VP made [NP Mary] [NP some coffee]]] [DOC]
 - b. [S Ann [VP made [NP some coffee] [PP for Mary]]] [for-construction]

2. Different opinions on the semantics of DOCs and to-constructions

- Information-structural approach**: There are no *semantic* differences between DOC and *to*-variant. They differ only according to the following information-structural principles:
 - a. Given (=old, pre-mentioned) material comes before new material.
 - b. Heavy (=long) phrases come last. [after Rappaport & Levin 2008]
- This correctly predicts the fact that pronouns nearly always precede full NPs, since pronouns give old information. More evidence seen below.
 - a. *I sent them a book* b. *?I sent a book to them*
 - a. *?I sent the people it* b. *I sent it to the people*
- HAVE-GOAL approach** (e.g. Harley, Krifka, Pinker, Richards...) says that there is a real semantic difference between DOC and *to*-construction. DOC involves the bringing-about of a possession (HAVE) relation between the objects, and the 1st object is a possessor. The *to*-construction expresses (possibly metaphorical) motion towards a goal. Example:

- a. *Cuthbert sent Josephine the book* = caused **her to have it** by sending it.
b. *Cuthbert sent the book to Josephine* = caused **it to go to her** by sending it.

2.1. Comparing the approaches: Differences between DOC and to-variants

2.1.1. Animacy

- It is often claimed that indirect objects must be animate because of data like the following:
 - a. I sent the letter to Fred. b. I sent the letter to Fred's home
 - c. I sent Fred the letter. d. *I sent Fred's home the letter
- a. I sent the letter to London.
 - b. I sent London the letter. [*London* = a group of people in London]
- However, the claim is wrong. Inanimate ind. objects are ok if they can *have* the direct objects. (This is possible if direct object is inalienably possessed or otherwise relational.)
 - a. The librarian **assigned/gave** the book a number. → The book *has* a number.
 - b. The sponsors **gave** the building a new roof/a chance.
 - c. The guitar work **gives** the song a sinister feel.
 - d. They **denied** the building a chance of restoration.
- a. The putsch gave the country a new dictator. cf. The country has a new dictator.
 - b. *The putsch gave me a new dictator. cf. *I have a new dictator.
- The **HAVE-GOAL approach** explains these facts simply. Inanimate indirect objects are acceptable if they are Recipients/Possessors. When they are unacceptable, they are just goals.
- The **information-structural approach** can be made compatible with the facts by saying that the equivalence between DOCs and *to*-constructions holds for **possessive to**, but not for **spatial to**. They differ as follows:
 - (15) **Possessive to** indicates that its complement is a Possessor or Recipient. Examples:
 - a. The book belongs **to** Jane.
 - b. When John died, his house went **to** his daughter.
 - c. He gave the house **to** his daughter.
 - d. There is plausibility **to** this idea (=The idea has plausibility)
 - (16) **Spatial to** indicates that its complement is a Goal (=final point of a spatial path). E.g.:
 - a. I sent the book **to** your home address.
 - b. They went **to** Siberia.

2.1.2. Themes not pre-existing the event

- Argument for HAVE-GOAL approach** (e.g. Krifka): DOC is good but *to*-variant bad if theme doesn't exist before the event and cannot move to a goal, as predicted by (10).
 - a. The noise gave me a headache [cf. *I have a headache*]
 - b. *The noise gave a headache to me
- a. Cuthbert's data gave me an idea
 - b. *Cuthbert's data gave an idea to me
- However, the argument has a problem because the *to*-variant is possible if the *to*-phrase is heavy, or if coming-into-existence entity is not new information in discourse, as (7) predicts.
 - a. The noise gave a headache to everyone that could hear it.
 - b. Cuthbert's data gave an idea to every linguist who hadn't fallen asleep during his talk

2.1.3. Idioms

- Harley (2002), Richards (2001): argument for HAVE-GOAL approach from idiom data like:
(20) a. The psycho gave me the creeps
b. *The psycho gave the creeps to me
c. I had/got the creeps
(21) LIKEWISE: give x the sack; give x the cold shoulder; give x a hard time
- Reply: (20)b) is bad because parts of idiom chunks aren't given info (Rappaport/Levin 2006). Moreover, the *to*-variant is ok if recipient is heavy:
- (22) a. The psycho gave the creeps to everyone who noticed the machete he was holding.
b. The boss gave the sack to everyone who disagreed with his unethical practices.

2.1.4. Inalienable possession

- Inalienable possession: possession relation which cannot be cancelled:
(23) INALIENABLE POSSESSION: *Mary has red hair; Mary's parents; give the house a new roof*
(24) ALIENABLE POSSESSION: *Mary has a car; Mary's dog; I gave Mary a dog.*
- Relevance of inalienable possession to the *to*-alternation:
(25) a. They gave a {table/patient} a new leg. [→table/patient has leg]
b. *They gave a new leg to a table.
c. #They gave a new leg to a patient. [to put on her mantle piece?]
- The HAVE-GOAL account explains this easily: *give* forces possession interp. In (b,c), leg moves to possessor. It can't be relational while moving, since not part of possessor. Hence only interp. is alienable possession (which is impossible with inanimates).
- But it is unclear if the HAVE-GOAL approach is needed to explain this, as inalienably possessed NPs must be c-commanded by their possessors anyway:
(26) a. John broke a leg.
b. Poor John! *A leg broke on him_i. [cf. *his leg broke on him*]
c. Poor John! *A leg was broken. [cf. *his leg was broken*]

2.1.5. Immobile possessions

- (27) a. They gave her a house.
b. They gave a house to her.
- HAVE-GOAL account has problems here because the house does not move. The contrast is not a problem for the information-structural approach.

2.2. Conclusions

- The information-structural approach is superior to the HAVE-GOAL approach, provided we distinguish between spatial and possessive *to*.

3. Appendix 1: The benefactive alternation (*for*-alternation)

- Benefactive alternation: indirect objects paraphrasing with *for* PPs. Four classes:

PERFORMED OBJECTS:

- (28) a. He played/sang them a song [for/to them]
b. He danced her a jig [for her/*to her]

OBTAINED OBJECTS:

- (29) a. He {got/fetched/bought/found/picked} her some flowers
b. He stole her some flowers [=for her, not from her]

CREATED OBJECTS:

Possession and double objects

- (30) a. I burnt her a cd [creation reading only]
b. make me a cake; knit her a sweater; build us houses; write me songs; roll them a joint
PREPARED OBJECTS: very productive but seldom noted (exc. Fellbaum 2005, Levin 1993). My proposal: *verb names event typically performed to enable use of object (often canonically).*

- (31) a. He crushed me some ice. I peeled her a banana; She opened me a can of beer
b. Can you put me in some toast [=put it in toaster; R. Zaucer p.c. (real example)]
c. *Can you fix me a bike? [fixing not a normal prerequisite for use of bikes]

Generalisation: In (modern, standard) English, *benefactive DOCS entail that both the direct object and the verbal event are for the indirect object* (not that indir. obj. has dir. obj.). This goes a long way towards explaining the classes of verbs allowing benefactive DOCS.

- (32) a. I {got/phoned} him a doctor. [doctor is for him, he doesn't have doctor]
b. I lit him the candle. [it's for him; he may have it already]
- (33) a. *I washed her the dishes [DP not for DP]
b. *I massaged her the back
c. *He opened her the door

4. Appendix 2: Possessors as locations and the decomposition of *have*

- Some linguists (e.g. Benveniste 1966, Freeze 1992, den Dikken 1997) argue that *have* itself should be decomposed:

« avoir n'est rien d'autre qu'un être à inversé » [Benveniste 1966 :197]

- The two sentences in (34) only differ in terms of information structure:

- (34) a. Marie a un livre. [theme/topic = Marie]
b. Le livre est à Marie. [theme/topic = le livre]

- Most languages lack a verb functioning like *have*, and would have to express *I have a book* with a sentence like *At me is a book* (Freeze 1992, Benveniste 1966). Two examples:

- (35) a. larkee-kee paas kuttaa hai [Hindi]
boy.OBL.-GEN proximity dog be
'The boy has a dog.'
- b. Liisa-lla on mies [Finnish]
Lisa-ADESSIVE be husband
'Lisa has a husband.' [l'adessif signale normalement la proximité]

5. References

- Bresnan, J. & Nikitina, T. 2006. On the gradience of the dative alternation. Ms. Stanford.
Fellbaum, C. 2005. Examining the constraints on the benefactive alternation. In M. Reis & S. Kepsner *Evidence in Linguistics*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 207-236.
Freeze, R. (1992). „Existentials and other locatives.“ *Language* 68, 3:553-596
Green, G. 1974. *Semantics and Syntactic Regularity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Harley, H. 2002. Possession and the double object construction. P. Pica and J. Rooryck *Yearbook of Linguistic Variation*, vol 2. 29-68.
Heine, B. 1997. *Possession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kittilä, S. 2005. Recipient-prominence vs. beneficiary-prominence. *Linguistic Typology* 9: 269-297.
Krifka, M. 2004. Semantic and pragmatic conditions for the dative alternation. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics* 4: 1-32.
Levin, B. 1993. *English verb classes and alternations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
McFadden, T. 2002. The rise of the *to*-dative in Middle English. In D. Lightfoot (ed.) *Syntactic effects of morphological change*. Oxford
Pinker, S. 1989. *Learnability and Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Richards, N. 2001. An Idiomatic Argument for Lexical Decomposition. *Linguistic Inquiry* 32: 183-192.
Rappaport Hovav, M. & Levin, B. 2008. The English Dative Alternation. *Journal of Linguistics* 44:129-187